

An Older Brother Helps Out

by Mordecai Richler

Illustrated by Sharon Matthews

When he was six years old, a mere child, he was known as Jacob Two-Two. He was given the name because he was two plus two plus two years old. He had two ears and two eyes and two feet and two shoes. He also had two older brothers, Daniel and Noah, and two older sisters, Emma and Marfa. But most of all, he was given the name because, as Jacob Two-Two himself once admitted, "I am the littlest in our family. Nobody hears what I say the first time. They only pay attention if I say things two times."



from Jacob Two-Two and the Dinosaur

But now that he was eight years old he felt that he was too grown up to go by such a childish name. All the same, it stuck to him. After all, he still had two older brothers and two older sisters. And, as they were quick to point out, if he had once been two plus two plus two years old, he was now—come to think of it—only two times two times two years old. Not much of a difference, they said, but they really didn't understand.

Jacob Two-Two had learned a good deal since he had been a mere six years old. He could now dial a telephone number, do joined-up writing of a sort, and catch a ball, providing Noah wasn't aiming it bang at his head. True, his two older brothers and his two older sisters were still taller and much more capable than he was. And snootier than ever, it sometimes seemed to him.

Marfa, for instance, who was only four years older than Jacob Two-Two, no longer allowed him into the bathroom with her. "I know you're too young and stupid to understand," she said, "but it just isn't right for you to take a shower with me anymore."

Even so, some things were looking up. Jacob Two-Two could now cut a slice of bread that wasn't a foot thick on one end and thin as a sheet of paper on the other—unless Emma gave him a poke at just the right moment and then squealed, "Oh, Mummy, I don't want to make any trouble, but look what the baby of the family just did to the last loaf of bread in the house."

School was also a problem. A big problem.



When Jacob Two-Two had been a mere six years old, the family had lived in a big rambling old house on Kingston Hill in England. A year later his father had moved them all to Montreal, Canada, where he had come from in the first place. This was a great hardship for Jacob Two-Two, because the kids at his new school in Montreal poked fun at his British accent. The trouble-maker-in-chief was fat Freddy Jackson. He would gather together a bunch of the other kids and then corner Jacob Two-Two in the schoolyard. "Hey, Jacob," he'd say, "what does your father put in his car to make it run?"

"Petrol," Jacob Two-Two would reply. "Petrol." Because when he was nervous or excited he still said many things two times.

"That's what they call gasoline over in stinky old England," Freddy would explain, even as the other kids had begun to giggle. Then, turning to Jacob Two-Two again, he would ask, "And what are we standing on right now?"

"The grahs."

Soon enough, however, Jacob Two-Two learned to say "gasoline" when what he really meant was "petrol." Practicing in front of a mirror, he even taught himself to say "grass" instead of "grahs."

Unfortunately, everybody in the family picked on Jacob Two-Two too. If, for instance, he came home from school in a cheerful mood and called out, "Am I ever starved! What's for dinner?" Noah was bound to leap up, make a frightening face, and say, "Dead cow."

Once he came home from school and asked his father for a measly dollar so that he could go to the movies on Saturday morning. Noah, as usual, had to put in his two cents. "You can't give the child a dollar just like that," he said. "It would be spoiling him." (But Noah wasn't all bad. He often allowed Jacob Two-Two to tag along with him on his newspaper route. In fact, he actually allowed Jacob Two-Two to deliver the newspaper himself to any house with a sign that warned BEWARE OF THE DOG.)

"Your brother has a point, Jacob. You will have to win the money by proving your intelligence. Now then, are you

ready for a quiz?"

"Yes," Jacob Two-Two said. "Yes, I am!"

"Good. Now you will have to concentrate, because I can allow you only five seconds on the first impossibly difficult question. Ready?"

"Ready!"



"Okay. Here we go. For a big fifty cents tell me how long was the Seven Years War?"

"Seven years!"

"Excellent! Brilliant! Now, watch out for the next question because it is about the kings of France. Ready?"

"Yes."

"Good. Here it comes. For another fifty cents tell me what Louis came after Louis the Fourteenth?"

"Louis the Fifteenth."

"Wow! You're really flying today, kid. You have won a dollar," his father said, handing it over. "Now, are you a chicken-livered, trembling coward, or would you like to try another question—a really easy one—for one thousand dollars?"

"Yes! Yes! I'll try it."

"All right, then. Here it is. Jacob Two-Two, for one



thousand dollars cash, tell me how you spell
'chrysanthemum.' "

Jacob Two-Two groaned. Why, he thought, was everybody in the house always teasing him? Everybody. One day, sure enough, it got him into trouble at school, but that was Daniel's fault, teasing again. Jacob Two-Two had been lying on the living-room carpet showing off that he was now old enough to have homework to do in his very own assignment book. Looking up from the book, he asked, "Does anybody know what 'denote' means?"

Daniel told him what it meant, but Jacob Two-Two should have guessed that something was up, because no sooner did Daniel explain the word than Emma hid her face in a pillow. Noah burst out laughing. Marfa whispered, "Hey, Daniel, you shouldn't have said that. He's just dumb enough to repeat it at school."



Actually Jacob Two-Two hardly ever spoke up in class, because he was still ashamed of his British accent. This worried his schoolteacher, Miss Sour Pickle. First thing at school the next morning, Miss Pickle turned to Jacob Two-Two. "Jacob, would you please stand up and tell the rest of the class the meaning of the word 'denote.' "

"Yes, Miss Pickle." And, remembering what Daniel had taught him, Jacob Two-Two said, "Denote is what you write with de pencil and de paper."

Everybody in the class began to laugh, except for Miss Pickle. "Well, I never!" she said. "What cheekiness! How very, very rude! Jacob, you go stand in the corner at once, and after class is out this afternoon you will stay behind to wash all the blackboards."

When Jacob Two-Two finally got out of school late that afternoon, the other kids were waiting for him. But they hadn't stayed behind to tease him about his British accent. Instead they wanted to be friends. All of them. Even fat Freddy.

Jacob Two-Two was thrilled. Things were working out for him in Montreal at last.

